

## **fall into your human hands** by missgoalie75

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** F/M, Gen, Post-Canon

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Eleven (Stranger Things), Jonathan Byers, Nancy Wheeler

**Relationships:** Eleven & Jonathan Byers, Jonathan Byers & Nancy Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2016-08-22

**Updated:** 2016-08-22

**Packaged:** 2022-03-31 22:29:01

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Warnings:** Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 6,505

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

*As sick as it is, it was easier to talk to people when life and death were in the balance.* | Jonathan spends time alone with Eleven for the first time and Nancy pays a visit to the Byers' home.

# **fall into your human hands**

## **Author's Note:**

**Characters/Pairings:** Jonathan, Eleven, Nancy, feat. Joyce & Will; a little Jonathan/Nancy

**Spoilers/Warnings:** post-S1 by about 2-3 months – Eleven has returned and Will's little issue is solved; references to trauma experienced in S1

**Disclaimer:** Title is from "Human Hands" by Elvis Costello.

A/N: I almost summarized this as "Jonathan goes through a few classes in Friendship 101" because I'm a lame-o. Thanks for Rain and Lola for basically encouraging me after I asked begged them to encourage me. Because that's what real friends do. I think. Also, if there's something I want to be remembered for in my fandom career is that random friendships are the best friendships ✌

Eleven becomes a new fixture of the Byers' small household. At first, Jonathan's mom is set on having him and Will share a room, but it's clear after the first night that Eleven and Will like being within reach; Jonathan woke up the next morning to find Eleven in Will's bed and they were clutching each other's hands like lifelines. Jonathan can understand that. Honestly, he thinks back to sharing Nancy's bed with her and misses that safety. But he knows his place and is comfortable waking up at two in the morning every night and listening to Joy Division to help him fall back asleep again. Or, if it's really bad, sometimes Simon & Garfunkel. But nobody has to know that.

So, Will and Eleven share a room, at least for now. A few times a week, Jonathan has dinner with his mom, Will, and Eleven. He drives Will and Eleven to the Wheelers' house every other day and picks them up. His mom takes Eleven shopping for clothes. And Jonathan adapts.

It's inevitable, that at some point Jonathan will spend time with Eleven without anyone else. So it's not much of a surprise when it

does happen. Eleven, however, doesn't seem to like any deviation from a schedule, from what she knows. Which is okay. So he smiles at her and offers to toast her an Eggo after picking her up from school.

"Hopefully Will's various appointments won't take very long," Jonathan says as they sit across from each other at the table.

Eleven is quiet, only nodding her head once, looking down at the table.

He considers asking her how school went, but he can't bring himself to continue talking. As sick as it is, it was easier to talk to people when life and death were in the balance.

The toaster dings and he's grateful for an excuse to prepare Eleven's snack. Usually she likes her waffles plain, never seeming to care about the use of utensils, but he still takes the time to give her a napkin, a fork and a knife, and maple syrup. He also pours her a glass of milk.

She smiles at him. "Thank you."

He smiles back. "You're welcome."

His stomach growls and she looks at him with wide eyes.

He flushes. "I guess I'm hungry," he says, patting his stomach. Unsurprising, given that he spent the lunch period hiding in the darkroom just to avoid another potentially awkward lunch with Steve and Nancy. While he appreciates their trying, sometimes he just... can't. "I'll eat Eggos too."

So he sticks two into the toaster and breaks apart the empty box and throws it in the garbage. At this rate, they'll have to buy more than four boxes of Eggos a week.

He turns back to look at her and he's surprised she's picked up the maple syrup, inspecting it.

He leans back against the counter and watches her. He considers explaining what it is, but sometimes he wonders if it ever becomes an

overload – learning years' worth of things – and maybe inspecting or exploring on her own is easier.

Eventually she flips the cap open and brings the bottle under her nose. The toaster dings and she gasps a little in surprise, looking at the bottle in confusion. He just smiles and plucks the waffles out of the toaster and onto the counter until he can find a clean plate.

Once he sits down across from her, she's still holding the bottle of maple syrup, unsure.

He holds out his hand across the table. She stares at it for a moment before reaching a hand out and shaking it firmly. He can't help it – he laughs a little.

"Uh, thank you," he says. "But I was actually hoping to use the maple syrup."

Her mouth purses into a little 'o.' She hands him the bottle and watches intently how he drizzles it on his waffles. He also squeezes some on his plate. Once he's done, he places the bottle between them and slides his plate in the middle. He sticks his finger into the expanding puddle of syrup and brings it to his mouth.

He waits a few seconds, but Eleven eventually sticks out a finger and mimics him. She stares at the syrup on her finger for a moment with a furrowed brow before her eyes widen at it rolling down her fingers. She quickly sticks her finger into her mouth, her eyes widening further.

"Sweet, right?"

She nods, taking her finger out of her mouth. "Sweet," she confirms.

He smiles and brings the plate closer to him.

They eat in silence for a while. Eleven still eats her Eggo without a fork and knife or syrup, but when she's finished eating, she picks up the syrup bottle and pours some onto her plate. She uses her fork to eat the syrup.

Once Jonathan finishes his plate, he yawns, his jaw cracking. He

brings his hands to his stinging eyes and rubs them furiously, tears leaking at the corners. Maybe he can manage a nap before his shift at work and maybe he can squeeze in some math sheets and just finish the rest of homework –

"Jonathan?"

He wipes his eyes before looking at Eleven. She's concerned.

"Sorry, I'm, uh, just tired," he explains. "I didn't sleep very well last night."

Her eyes are solemn, haunting, when she says, "The monster."

His eyes automatically flicker to the hallway. Even though the house is pristine, holding almost no evidence of what happened that terrible week in November, he blinks and can still see it, like nothing has changed, months haven't passed, that he's still stuck in this perpetual loop of this awful point in time.

He exhales sharply, feeling the weight of the monster on his chest, and blinks rapidly until the image disappears.

"I'm okay," he says, trying to smile at her. It's comfortable to fudge the truth, to put Will at ease and keep everything in a tightly shut box. He's done it for so long that it seems easy to do it for Eleven, who has been through enough and doesn't deserve to see more bad shit; she deserves to experience the good things.

"Friends don't lie."

He wouldn't know.

They stare at each other for a few moments before he admits, "Never really had a lot of friends."

She smiles a little. "Me neither."

She may have first tried maple syrup fifteen minutes ago and just started going to school a month ago, but that doesn't mean she's innocent or ignorant. And Will has been through more than Jonathan has – does Will really need that protection anymore? Jonathan

couldn't even protect Nancy the way he would like to – he fell asleep with a hand on the gun, like that was going to help anyone.

And now here he is, unable to extend his big brother role to Eleven, the only thing he really has (or had) going for him.

"We're friends," he confirms, picking on a thread from the hem of his sweater. "But also, I mean, if you want, I can be like an older brother, too."

"Brother," she repeats.

He nods.

Suddenly, she smiles. "A sibling. Like Nancy."

"Yeah. She's like your big sister, right?"

She nods. "She got this for me," she says, plucking at the collar of her dress. "Pretty."

He nods. The dress is pretty, Eleven is pretty regardless of what she wears – he hopes someone is telling her that, someone that will matter, like his mom or Nancy or Mike – and Nancy is pretty for caring.

Nancy also looked pretty today at school, but that was obvious with the way that Steve couldn't keep his hands off her in the hallway.

"Do you want to take Nancy to the Snow Ball?"

He tilts his head to the side. The Snow Ball came and went already. But he knows that sometimes she misinterprets specific comments or phrases as having more generalized meanings. It doesn't take him very long to realize what she's asking.

She stares at him. Her gaze can be unnerving, but he likes that she doesn't put up a pretense the way he does with his camera.

He nods. "Yeah, I do."

She nods in understanding. She goes back to eating the syrup.

"But, uh, she doesn't...well, she sort of does, but she doesn't *really* know that. Since Steve is...taking her to the Snow Ball," he continues, stuttering a little.

"Steve," she says, scooping the syrup with her fork. "Hair."

He snorts. "Yeah. Hair."

Her hair is starting to grow in. He can tell by the way she stares at Nancy that she wants longer hair, finds it special. He hopes that she'll like what she sees in the mirror eventually, or at least come to peace with it.

He yawns again. "I'm going to try to sleep for a little before going to work and dropping you at the Wheeler's if they don't get back in time. Are you okay?"

She nods, sticking her fork in her mouth. He gets up from the table and rummages through the utensil drawer for a spoon. He gives it to her. "It'll be easier," he tells her before lightly patting her head, grabbing his things, and leaving.

He shuts his eyes every time he walks down the hallway. While he can navigate his house with his eyes closed – it is a small house and it is (was?) a sanctuary from the world that only seemed capable of ridiculing him when it wasn't ignoring him – this isn't something he's doing to prove to himself or anyone else.

He enters his room and takes care to leave the door open. He sighs, carefully putting his camera on his nightstand. He sits down on his bed and picks up his headphones, debating on putting something on to help him sleep – he's sure his mom would wake him up before his shift...or maybe he shouldn't, just in case...

He looks up to find Eleven standing in the doorway.

He doesn't know what to say, but she's confident in the way she strolls into his room and sits next to him.

He holds up his headphones. "I know everyone is teaching you everything, but you have to do me the honor of introducing you to some music."

She reaches across his lap for the headphones, turning them in her hands. "Should I stay, or should I go?" she whispers.

He hates that he can't think of that song the same way anymore. "Right. That's by a band called The Clash. But we can do that another time. Whenever you want."

She puts the headphones on her lap and takes his hand with both of hers and squeezes. She has such small hands, but they're strong. "You can sleep."

He places his free hand on top of hers.

"Sleep," she repeats.

He pats her hands and slowly removes his hand from her hold so he can stretch out on his bed, careful to give her plenty of room. She's quick to take his hand back again once he rests on his side.

"You protect everyone," he says, squeezing her hand.

She squeezes back. "You too."

Not the way that she can. He can throw a punch – his dad taught him at least that – but he's pretty ineffectual, as he's come to learn, when he's facing the horrible monster.

But she's still staring at him, willing him to take her words as the truth. 'Friends don't lie' – he guesses he'll have to accept that, trust her honesty.

"But who takes care of you?" she asks, voice soft.

He doesn't think she expects an answer, which is good because he doesn't have much of one – it never mattered, exactly. He can handle himself, for the most part. He thinks.

His eyelids eventually grow heavy as an automatic response to being horizontal. Eleven begins humming – it doesn't take him long to realize she's humming the first verse and chorus to "Should I Stay or Should I Go" on repeat – she *really* needs to become familiar with more music, but it's still unbearably sweet.

The corner of his mouth twitches and she slowly pets his hand. Eventually, against his better judgment or will, he falls asleep.

\*\*

He wakes up suddenly to Eleven shaking his shoulder. "What – are you –?"

She brings a fist up to her ear. "Phone."

He blinks a few times before sitting up, his eyelids still heavy enough that he can barely see in front of him as he's led by the hand to the phone.

He clears his throat before saying anything, but his voice is still rough when he says, "Hello?"

"*Jonny-boy! Hey, it's Eric.*"

"Hey, what's up?" Jonathan asks, even though he knows what's coming.

*"Listen, man, do you mind if we swap shifts? I'll take yours tonight and you'll take mine tomorrow night? I just got a date, and –"*

"It's fine," Jonathan says, not wanting to get engrossed in a conversation. Besides, it's not like he has plans Saturday night anyway – he might as well distract himself from the fact that he's seventeen and still doesn't have a social life. "You work tonight, I'll work tomorrow."

"*You're the best, thanks – I owe ya.*"

"No problem. Bye." He hangs up and takes a deep breath. Eleven stares at him.

"Did, uh...did Joyce call?" he stutters.

"Yes. Will has...a cav-it-tee," she sounds out.

Well, there goes whatever savings he had left for more film rolls.

"Guess I should start making dinner. Maybe something soft for Will. Do you want to help?"

After a few moments, she nods.

He goes into the cabinets and pulls out a box of bowtie pasta. "You can set the table – each of us gets a fork and a napkin," he tells her.

He gets four plates and puts them on the counter.

She nods and goes over to the counter, stopping short. She narrows her eyes and very slowly, the plates begin floating. He smiles as he watches her direct the plates to each spot on the table. He's still not used to what she can do. It feels like he's eleven, the kind of awe he feels.

Once she's finished, she gradually pulls out the utensil drawer with her mind, forks slipping out one by one. They're floating in the air until the door knocks and suddenly, they're pointed at the door, threatening as Eleven stands battle-ready.

"Whoa, uh, let me...see who it is," Jonathan says softly, holding out a hand, pleading for her to wait.

He's about to check through the peep hole when he hears, "It's Nancy."

Jonathan checks over his shoulder and Eleven's no longer tense and on the attack: the forks are floating again and placed on the table. He unlocks the door and greets Nancy with a small smile. "Hi."

"Hi. Sorry if I scared you."

"It's okay. Do you, uh...want to come in?"

"Yeah, sure, thanks."

He steps aside and lets her in, shutting the door behind her.

"Hi, El," Nancy greets with a cheerful smile and a wave. Eleven smiles. "Did you have a good day at school?"

Eleven thinks before nodding.

"That's good!" She turns to Jonathan. "Your mom called and said the dentist was running behind, Will was getting a cavity filled, and won't be home for a while."

Jonathan exhales a laugh under his breath. "Yeah, uh, she called the house. Eleven picked up."

"Oh," Nancy says, crossing her arms across her chest. He's beginning to realize it's a nervous tic, the way she squeezes her arm. "I guess she just...wanted to make sure more than one person knew."

He nods. "Makes sense. I was sleeping before, so."

She smiles a little. "I can tell." She reaches out and gestures toward his eyes. "Your eyes are puffy."

He looks down and rubs his eyes with a hand. "Yeah, I guess I was pretty out of it."

"It's good you slept. You look tired. More than usual." She drops her arm and crosses her arms again.

He nods. What else is there to say? They all have nightmares – there's nothing new or special about it. He appreciates Eleven's presence, but that's not his usual. He's used to wrapping his arms around himself.

"I'm just making dinner. Do you want to stay? We'll have plenty. I'm sure Will won't eat a lot with the cavity and all," Jonathan offers, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

She opens her mouth and then closes it. "I don't want to intrude..."

"You won't be." He turns to Eleven, who is staring at them intently. "Would you like it if Nancy stayed for dinner?" he asks her.

He knows sometimes too many people make her nervous, that it becomes an overload, and some days she's more sensitive than others. But thankfully, she nods and smiles. "Yes, stay." She walks over to the dining room table, a hand out to unzip her bag resting by the door and a book flies over to her. She takes her usual seat across from the

sink, her legs swinging gently back and forth. She's engrossed.

"It's nothing fancy, just pasta," he says apologetically to Nancy. "You can sit anywhere you'd like. Shouldn't be more than twenty minutes."

Nancy smiles and follows him to the kitchen. He smiles back, washing his hands briefly in the sink.

"So, you make 'awesome eggs,' according to Mike, and you make pasta. What else can you make?" she asks with a teasing glint in her eye.

He hates how flustered he feels when he recognizes how comfortable she is around him. Half the time he feels like he hasn't earned it yet. "A lot of things. Simple things, but...I like making French toast. We don't make it much since it's a lot of bread to use for one meal, but it's worth it."

Her eyebrows pinch. He doesn't know what he said to trigger it. "Maybe I should have you come over and use my ingredients and cook for me," she says, trying to lighten the mood.

He *knows* that isn't what she meant, but it's still a nice thing to think about. Besides, he's sure Mrs. Wheeler is a much better cook than he is, having access to a lot more ingredients to make things taste better.

"How are you doing?" he asks, looking through the cabinets until he finds a box of pasta and a can of tomato sauce.

She shrugs. "Okay. The same. Some days are good, some days are bad."

He nods in understanding.

"I really miss having a friend I didn't have to think about talking to, you know? Someone I could say anything to and knew I wouldn't be judged so much."

He doesn't know. But he can imagine that would be a nice thing to have, something that would be unbearable to lose, so he nods.

She sighs a little, looking down at the counter as he grabs a pot and

fills it with water. "We're friends, though, right?"

He pauses after placing the pot on the stove. He tries to smile reassuringly. "Yeah, we are," he says softly.

She nods. "That makes it easier."

It's nice to know someone out there gets it, who can look at him and knows.

He makes dinner in silence and Nancy watches him attentively. He occasionally checks on Eleven, who is still reading, now mouthing the words as she moves down the page.

The phone rings as he's straining the pasta.

"I'll get it," Nancy says, her ponytail swinging behind her as she walks over to the phone. Jonathan stares unabashedly. "Byers' residence," she announces, eyes wide and blue. She catches his staring and smiles at him. He quickly looks down, embarrassed.

"Yeah, it's Nancy, hi, Mrs. Byers," Nancy says, twisting the chord around a thin finger. He wishes he had his camera on him, but he promised he'd never take another photo of her, so he simply tries to commit it to memory. She frowns. "Oh, no, poor Will. Yeah, okay, I'll tell Jonathan...of course. You, too. Bye." She hangs up. "They had to wait until the dentist's last patient left before he could take care of the cavity. They're working on it now."

He picks up the strainer and dumps the pasta back into the empty pot. She comes back to the kitchen and stops right beside him, turning on the sink. Their shoulders brush.

"She said they were going to the market to pick up some food for him to eat in the meantime," she continues, careful in washing her hands thoroughly. "So I guess it's just us." She turns off the sink and turns to Eleven. "You should wash your hands, too. Dinner's about ready, right?" She looks at Jonathan.

He nods. "Yeah. Make sure to use soap this time," he reminds Eleven, who gets up from the chair and walks to the bathroom.

Nancy smiles after her. "You're really sweet with her."

He blinks. "I was going to say the same about you. You make it seem so easy."

She focuses on him with surprise. "I don't know if you've noticed, but she trusts you a lot," she says quietly. "You treat her like the boys do."

Eleven comes back into the kitchen so he can't ask Nancy to clarify.

Nancy helps him prepare the plates and fill glasses with water and by the time they all sit down with food in front of them – Jonathan at the head with Nancy on his right, Eleven on his left – a new facet of domesticity.

"Well, uh, enjoy," he says lamely.

Eleven dives in, spearing a few bowties before stuffing it in her mouth. Her attention is solely on her plate and seems pleased to keep it there. He smiles a little before looking at Nancy, who is watching Eleven with fondness.

"I think the bowties are a Byer family favorite," he says to Nancy.

"I always liked them. Apparently the Italian word for it is 'butterfly.'"

He waits nervously as she carefully takes a bite. Her eyes brighten as she chews. "This is really good," she says once she swallows.

He sighs a little in relief. "Thanks. I mean, it's not –"

"Jonathan," she says seriously, reaching over to touch his forearm. Even though he's wearing a thick sweater, the pressure of her hand is almost searing. "It's great," she reassures him.

They eat in silence for a few moments and Nancy adds, "You should probably teach me how to cook. Home Ec has only taught me how to make cookies and brownies. And lemon squares, but those tasted terrible. We're making a cake next week, but all that just seems useless."

"A cake can be useful," Jonathan says after taking a sip of water.

"Whenever we could I'd bake a cake for Will's birthday."

"What kind of cake?"

"Chocolate with chocolate frosting." He shrugs his shoulders. "He makes it easy."

She smiles at him and they finish their meal in a comfortable silence. Once everyone is done, he stands up to begin collecting everyone's dishes when Nancy suddenly jumps to her feet.

"I'll do it!" she says, immediately grabbing his plate from his hand.  
"It's the least I can do."

"But...you're a guest..." he starts.

"I'm the one who barged in uninvited. Please," she counters as she walks over to Eleven's side of the table.

Except Eleven stands up as well, moving her plate and fork off the table.

"You cook, we wash," Eleven says.

It's a rule in the Byer household – whoever doesn't cook, has to do the dishes, except at one point he became so used to doing both that it's still an adjustment when his mom offers to cook or she immediately starts grabbing dishes to wash.

Nancy nods. "What she said!"

They smile at each other and Jonathan awkwardly remains in a half-sitting, half-standing position until Nancy tells him to sit.

He plops down and watches them. Nancy washes and Eleven dries. She seems to be practicing her powers, working on her dexterity, but Nancy gently encourages her to use her hands while cleaning the glasses.

His heart seizes in his chest. He knows Nancy is better than what misconstrued idea he had of her in the beginning, but he does think she'd made a really kind mom.

Once they're almost done, he gets up and goes to the cupboard on Nancy's right, pulling out a box of Giggles cookies.

"Those faces always creep me out," Nancy admits.

"I know, they are creepy," Jonathan agrees. "But they taste pretty good."

"So good."

He checks the box and winces. If he gives Eleven two and Nancy two, then there should be enough for Will to have a few during the week before his next paycheck comes in. He grabs fresh napkins and gives Nancy and Eleven two cookies each and puts the box back in the cabinet.

Nancy stares at him. "You're not having them?"

Eleven looks at the table and then up at Jonathan in concern.

He bites the inside of his cheek. He's...a little uncomfortable talking about how tight money is, especially with having another person to take care of, but there's no way he'll voice that in front of Eleven. So he says, "I'm still full. I'll have one later."

Eleven sits down, stares at her cookie, trying to mimic the face. Jonathan grins. Eleven likes to split the cookie and eat the plain side first and lick the icing next. She learned that trick from the boys.

Nancy eats it straight. "I haven't had these in a while. I've been forcing everyone to have my leftover Home Ec disasters this quarter," she says sadly.

"They can't be that bad," he says.

She gives him a pointed look. "You can be my first cake victim this week."

"Okay."

She smiles before taking another bite. As she's chewing, she picks up her second cookie and places it in front of him. Eleven is making

another face at the second cookie and Nancy mouths to him, "It's okay."

He smiles at her and takes care to eat the cookie straight, even though sometimes he enjoys licking the icing like a kid. After all, he taught Will that trick.

\*\*

Jonathan brushes his teeth alongside Eleven because she's notorious for finding creative ways to skip doing it. They do a good job alternating when to spit in the sink.

"If you're tired, you can sleep in my room, if you want. You can listen to music," he says as they rinse off their toothbrushes. "Something relaxing. Like Simon and Garfunkel. But you can't tell anyone I have them," he continues, smiling in a joking manner as they leave the bathroom.

"I'll stay up," she says. "Not tired."

He nods. "Okay. Do you want to play a game or something?"

She smiles and simply takes her book, leaving him to sit on his mom's recliner, making herself right at home. Once she's settled, she looks at him expectantly, then at the hallway, then back at him.

Nancy has been gone a while...

"Right," he mutters, squeezing her shoulder on his way down the hallway, past the bathroom, and into his room.

His throat is dry and his stomach drops to his feet when he sees her sitting on his bed, slowly looking through the photographs he worked on during lunch. He wants to crawl into himself and never let anyone see him again.

She looks up and smiles softly. "These are really good."

He can't breathe and his heart hurts.

She pats the bed, wordlessly asking him to sit next to her. It takes him a few beats to do so, careful to make sure there is a few inches between them.

She grins at the next picture she sees – it's half the cheerleading squad in the library, trying to hold back laughter.

"Have you thought about submitting some of your photos for the yearbook? I think people would appreciate them," she says thoughtfully, flipping to the next photo. It's of Steve focusing intently on the mirror inside his locker, fixing his hair. She snorts. "His hair is remarkable."

"It takes a lot of time and effort," he adds dryly.

She laughs a little. She slips the photo in back of the others and pauses at the photo of Eleven staring at the camera, her face expressionless, eyes absorbing, wearing a pair of Will's sweatpants and a purple shirt his mom had recently bought her.

"You capture her so well," Nancy says.

"What did you mean earlier? When...when you said I...treat her like our brothers do?"

She's still staring at the picture. "I mean...you're not insensitive or blunt like them...but you treat her like a person. Joyce sees her as a young kid who needs to be taken care of, I see her as...this poor girl who was deprived of everything. But you just see her...as a person." She shakes her head. "I don't know. I'm probably not explaining it right."

He shifts a little and he shrugs. His knee lightly bumps hers. "I just..." he thinks a little. "I know she's been through things we can't imagine. But...at the end of the day, she's uncomfortable in crowds and only trusts those closest to her...doesn't really follow social cues." He shrugs again, looking down at the floor. "It's pretty...normal. To me, anyway."

She looks at him unguarded; he doesn't think he's ever experienced such a thing.

She goes to the next photo and he hears her stop breathing. His mom took this picture – he's in between Will and Eleven. Will had started to tickle his side right before the picture and as a reflex, Jonathan had squeezed Eleven's side, which made *her* laugh, so they're all laughing with their eyes shut.

"I don't think I've ever seen you smile like that," she says in an odd voice.

He doesn't know what to say to that. Not a lot of things make him really happy. Will makes him happy – probably the happiest – and he enjoys his photography and he likes cooking, it makes him feel useful and needed, and he loves his music.

Nancy makes him happy. He's unsure how mutual it is.

"I'm kind of...a lot ticklish, really," he admits, unsure of what else to say.

She shoots him a mischievous grin. "I'll keep that in mind for another day."

She looks at the picture a little longer. "I hope you give this to your mom. She'll love it on the wall somewhere."

They've never put photos on the wall, but maybe they should start instead of keeping everything in boxes.

She glances up at him again, concerned as she reaches up, gently touching the skin under his eyes, which are puffy and ringed. He hates looking at himself in the mirror for too long. "Who takes care of you?"

He can't move under her touch. Her fingers are cold. "Eleven asked me that earlier," he says, his voice maybe a little hoarse. "I didn't know what to say at the time."

She drops her hand, but she's turned to face him, their knees touching. Her hands are close to his.

"You know your phone makes calls," she says in a near whisper. "You can call me at night too."

But she hasn't called lately, not in a few weeks. He assumed she was starting to move on, but judging by the way she can't stop moving her hands, trembling, maybe he's still not reading her correctly.

In a moment of bravery, his hand moves from his leg to hers, steadyng them. "I always felt better when you called," he says. "So maybe you do."

(She does, definitely does.)

She maneuvers her hands to grip his tightly. Words are lost on him, the silence tentative and comforting and something precious to share. He never allowed himself to think of something like this, but with her here, looking at his photos with something akin to appreciation and sitting on his bed – he'll replay it over and over until he can even recall the sound between words.

His nerves on the back of his hands ache; the only people who have touched him with kindness have been his mom and Will.

He remembers the way Nancy's hands, gentle and nervous, had wrapped his hand, the cut still bleeding and stinging. They both have scars now. Her fingers shift so she pressed down on his scar, making sure that it's there.

"I want to," she whispers, eyes on his and he doesn't know how their faces are so close, foreheads nearly touching.

He hopes his breathing isn't so loud and that he can control his body to not tremble. He's afraid of anything else happening – absolutely terrified – but at the same time, he's curious and wants it, just to see what it's like. Not that he will – she's with Steve and they're happy and he's Jonathan Byers, fortunate to have his brother alive and well now, his mom a little more at ease and present, and a younger sister he didn't think he wanted, but is pleased to have.

He can't have this, he won't have this; it's okay.

Their foreheads press and for a wild, limitless moment, he thinks, *maybe*.

A point comes when the tension leaves as silently as it comes and he

misses it, wants to recall it, but he knows it's gone.

They squeeze each other's hands and pull apart slowly. She's still holding on tightly, her smile small and tentative.

"I'm not in any of these pictures," she says.

Their hold loosens, but still present. Soft, less desperate.

"I, uh," he stutters. "I just...I figured after...you wouldn't like that. So," he says, shrugging a little.

"You know, there's a thing called *asking permission*," she teases a little.

They've stopped holding hands, but his hand is in between hers. He stares at her, unsure.

"Ask," she prompts, fingers running over his scar once.

He clears his throat. "Uh, can I...may I...?"

She pats the back of his hand, stopping him from struggling further to find words that didn't make him feel wrong. "Yes. But on one condition."

His eyebrows furrow. "Okay..." he trails off, curious.

"I have to take a picture of you," she says, almost pleased.

It's not often he's on the other side of the camera – it makes him nervous.

He takes a deep breath. "Yeah, sure."

She beams for a moment, reaching for his camera on his nightstand. This isn't the first time she's held his camera – he's shown her and Steve how to use it during lunch period one day. It was one of the better times they spent time together. They took a few pictures and they all turned out rather poor, but Steve was nice enough to tell Jonathan that he had talent.

"How do you...want me?"

She pauses with the camera halfway to her face, considering. "Maybe...just...look at me? Don't smile, if you don't want to. Just...be you."

He's uncomfortable at the direct focus. He shifts, looks around the room. But she seems patient, his camera up, but he can see half her face.

"I'm sorry," he says, his body still and eyes meeting her blue one.

Her mouth parts, like she wants to say something, but eventually, finally, she takes a photo.

He can hear his mom struggling with the keys to the front door.

The front door eventually opens and his mom calls, "*Jon, El – we're home!*"

Nancy lowers the camera and smiles apologetically. "Next time." She places the camera with his photographs and stands up, immediately offering her hand to him.

He reaches for it, fingertips dancing over her scar briefly. Her hand flexes. He takes it and stands up, holding hands down the hallway, something he wants to keep with him tonight when he goes to sleep, and they let go when they enter the living room.

"Hi, Nancy! Thank you again for making sure everyone knew," his mom says with a grateful smile.

Nancy nods. "Of course."

Will is sitting at the kitchen table across from Eleven. It seems whatever was used to numb his mouth is beginning to fade, given the way he's cupping his cheek, a morose expression on his face.

"There's pasta leftover on the stove," Jonathan says.

His mom shoots him a grateful look and heads to the stove.

"Are you okay heading home alone?" Jonathan asks Nancy softly.

She nods. "I'll call you when I get home."

"Okay."

"Thank you for dinner."

He nods, smiling a little.

"I'm going to head home, but it was nice seeing you Mrs. Byers," Nancy says to his mom. "And I hope you feel better soon, Will," she adds.

"Oh, okay, sure, make sure to give us a quick call that you made it home?"

Nancy smiles. "I will." She takes a few steps towards Eleven, placing her hands on her shoulders. "I'll see you tomorrow? I found some sweaters that I think you might like."

Eleven cranes her head back to smile at Nancy.

Nancy says her goodbyes again, eyes lingering on Jonathan, giving him a soft smile, before leaving.

"Let me guess – Eric wanted to switch shifts?" his mom asks as she reheats the pasta on the stove.

"Yeah. You're not working, right?"

"In the morning, but I'm taking extra shifts next week."

He nods, unsurprised.

"What were you two doing in your room?" his mom asks with feigned innocence.

Will looks at him with wide eyes. Eleven turns around and stares.

He flushes, swallowing. "Was showing her some pictures I took recently."

Will and their mom share a look and Eleven is still looking at him, but eventually smiles, a little mischievous. He scrunches his nose at

her and her smile broadens.

"I'll be in my room," Jonathan says, taking a few steps back. Will is still staring at him like he wants all the details, but then he winces and hunches his shoulders.

"Alright."

Jonathan heads back into his room, his hand flexing, remembering her hand in his.

He keeps the door open a crack – it's mostly so when his mom checks in their rooms in the middle of the night out of fear that she'll find their beds empty, but he also does it for when Will wants company or when Eleven wants to read through his magazines and look at pictures of things she never got see in a government lab.

He changes into pajamas – he hasn't quite adjusted to Eleven living here yet – and picks up his worn copy of *Othello* that he's reading for school when Eleven and Will come into his room with a deck of cards.

He puts the book back on his nightstand. Who wants to read Shakespeare on a Friday night anyway? Even he's not that much of a loser, he thinks.

"Rummy or Old Maid?" he asks.